

Transgender in the Novel *The Danish Girl*บุคคลข้ามเพศในนวนิยายเรื่อง *เดอะ เดนิช เกิร์ล*

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ABSTRACT

The Danish Girl, written by David Ebershoff, is based on the true story of the transgender pioneer Lili Elbe, who was born as Einar Wegener in the early 20th century. Einar had a happy married life with his wife Gerda Wegener until Gerda convinced her husband Einar to pose in women's clothing for a portrait, so Gerda would be able to finish her work. This small moment becomes a momentous incident when Einar realizes that he could not hide his true gender and identity as a woman any longer. The novel focuses on how Lili, formerly Einar, struggles throughout her groundbreaking transgender journey. Some of Lili's journey includes intimacy that challenges social standards, the division of males and females within society and Lili's sex reassignment surgery to become fully female. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the life of Lili Elbe/Einar Wegener is portrayed, by adopting Judith Butler's queer theory as the lens to obtain knowledge and understand queer individuals in society during that time period. Through the course of this study both confusion as well as social and family pressures were found, which can then be used to illuminate the definition of transgender in a "socially-constructed" society.

บทคัดย่อ

นวนิยายเรื่อง *เดอะ เดนิช เกิร์ล* เขียนโดยเดวิด เอเบอร์ชอฟฟ์ เป็นนวนิยายที่นำเสนอเรื่องราวของสตรีข้ามเพศในยุคแรกๆ ที่ชื่อว่า ลิลี เอลบ์ ซึ่งมีชีวิตอยู่จริงในช่วงต้นคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ 20 ลิลี ถือกำเนิดเป็นเพศชายโดยมีชื่อ-สกุลเดิมว่า ไอนาร์ เวเกเนอร์ ไอนาร์แต่งงานและใช้ชีวิตคู่กับภรรยา เกอร์ด้า เวเกเนอร์ เหตุการณ์ที่เป็นจุดพลิกผันในชีวิตของไอนาร์เกิดขึ้นเมื่อเกอร์ด้าขอให้สามีสวมใส่เสื้อผ้าสตรีเพื่อเป็นแบบให้เธอได้ทำงานวาดภาพลูกค้ำให้เสร็จ การได้สวมใส่ชุดกระโปรงของผู้หญิงทำให้ไอนาร์ตระหนักถึงอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศหรือตัวตนที่แท้จริงของเขาในฐานะผู้หญิงคนหนึ่ง นวนิยายเรื่องนี้เล่าเรื่องราวชีวิตของลิลีที่ต้องต่อสู้ดิ้นรนในฐานะสตรีข้ามเพศ เช่น ความสัมพันธ์แบบสามีภรรยาที่ฉีกกฎเดิม ๆ ของสังคม ที่มีเส้นกันแบ่งแยกระหว่างชายจริงหญิงแท้ และการผ่าตัดแปลงเพศ การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์ชีวิตของ ลิลี เอลบ์ หรือ ไอนาร์ เวเกเนอร์ สะท้อนผ่านทฤษฎีเคเวียร์ เพื่อให้เข้าใจบุคคลข้ามเพศในสังคมในยุคนั้น ผลของการศึกษาจากกรณีวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาพบว่า ความสับสนในตัวเอง อิทธิพลทางสังคม และแรงกดดันจากครอบครัว ส่งผลต่อการแสดงออกทางเพศและการดำรงตนของบุคคลข้ามเพศในสิ่งแวดล้อมที่สังคมกำหนด

Keywords: The Danish Girl, transgender, queer

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Introduction

The Danish Girl, written by David Ebershoff written in 2000, was his debut novel and then was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film under the same name in 2015. The novel is also a national bestseller and a New York Times Notable Book. Ebershoff created a fictional version of Lili Elbe's life, one of the first people to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Lili Elbe was born with the name Einar Wegener, in Denmark, in 1882. When Einar travels to Copenhagen to study art, he meets Gerda Gottlieb, also an art student, and they fall in love and get married in 1904. One day, Gerda, on a rush to finish her painting, asks Einar to pose in women's clothing for her portrait. Gerda does so because she has always been impressed with her husband Einar's womanish figure and beautiful long legs. For Einar, that is a momentous incident in his life. The gender floodgates in him are opened and he cannot stop the rise of his feelings that he identifies as a woman.

Transgender

When looking at transgender individuals in the present, compared to the first half of the 20th century, it seems that they have been relatively accepted since society tends to be more open to the third-sex community (Saputra & Bahar, 2020). Nevertheless, the opposite was true during the first half of the twentieth century.

The term transgender refers to individuals whose gender identity is incompatible with their biological assignment as birth and/ or the social expectations for a gender expression as male or female (as cited in Wilchins, 2002). According to The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), the term transgender focuses on those people who are confused and not happy with their gender-birth (Yash, 2003 as cited in Saputra and Nurdin, 2020). People whose gender conflicts with their biological assignment often seek to do sex-change surgery. Accordingly, their lifestyles also change in tandem with their new gender identity.

It is important to note that the concept of gender is a different concept from sex. Sex is considered the biological components that people are born with and identify them as either male or female. In general, males and females are taught to have appropriate behaviors in accordance with their sex. With this constraint, it labels people's sex to be straight masculine and straight feminine in an ideal "normative" society. This includes societal norms and how individuals should interact with people of the same or opposite sex in their families, communities, and other places. When individuals do not, or cannot, fit into the established sex norms, they often face stigma, discriminatory practices, and sometimes even social exclusion.

Gender, according to Judith Butler (1990), is the social identity which is based on a person's sexual identity. Gender is a concept that reflects the sociocultural character and an image formed from behavior and does not have to do with biological categories (Cho, 2014, as cited in Kim, H., Kim, J., & Kan, H., 2019). Hence, gender is changeable based on location, culture, and society, while sex is fixed since it is biological. Butler also agrees with Foucault's argument about "power." In this context,

“power” is the society that forces an individual to act as a man or a woman. In contrast Butler’s concept about gender is a “performance” or an “act” that creates gender through willingness of a person to perform or express repetitively, in his or her own way, on a regular basis. Repetition creates “gender performativity” that illustrates a person’s “gender identity.”

Being transgender is not limited to people who demand a change in their gender, but it is a fluidity that flows through all forms of gender identity. There are relevant factors defying an individual’s preferences other than those socially constructed by society, which is often judging and categorizing people into biologically fixed masculine and feminine roles. However, there is little information and even less discussion about queer theory, and Judith Butler is the most influential scholar in transgender studies. Queer theory is based in the concept of the fluidity of gender and its various forms of identities. Sedgwick (1993) states that “queer” seems to revolve around performative acts of how a person sees others and their surroundings. In addition, the lens of “queer” can only be indicated when in the first-person point of view. The writing in the novel *The Danish Girl* is an approach to provide knowledge and understanding about transgender individuals who are often treated as insignificant out in the world.

Queer Theory

Queer theory emerged from the study of homosexual preferences and the resulting social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexual behaviors. It is a theory that concerns both identity and gender. It is the concept of homosexual, which suggests that sexual orientation is not seen only from one aspect: sex (male or female) or gender (masculine or feminine). According to the theory, people cannot only be seen physically, but they can also be seen in terms of their mental and psychological aspects. It therefore can be said that queer theory comes from the idea of Judith Butler (1990). According to Butler, gender is somehow the result of an unnatural action. It is a process that has “neither origin nor end” (p. 46). This means that there are no set norms of how a person should act, but it is instead the person’s choice on how to act. Gender is explained as a basic element of an individual. Thus, sexual orientation is flexible and adaptable.

Butler continues that biological norms do not define people’s status as a man or woman. Instead, our status can be determined by our gender performativity, which means we have to show our gender through action and attitude to verify our correct gender classification. In short, gender is a human’s doing.

The Danish Girl is about the unusual and passionate story of a married couple. The novel portrays the unique intimacy that is quite different from other romantic relationship. The life of a pioneer in transgender history, Lili Elbe, a person who faces the challenges of the loyalty to marriage and her ambitions and inordinate passions, on her journey to becoming transgender. Since queer theory speculates the contrary to the domination of traditional movement that matches sex with definite gender and sexual standards, it is suitable for exploring *The Danish Girl*.

Objectives and Research Questions of the Study

This study aims to explore how the life of Einar Wegener was portrayed and represented in the novel, *The Danish Girl*, by using the queer theory created by Judith Butler as a lens to analyze, in order to obtain answers and knowledge to the following research questions.

1. How does Einar personally experience and then deal with the confusion of his gender identity throughout the novel *The Danish Girl*?
2. What are the family and social factors that impact Einar and inspire her to identify as transgender?

Methodology

Type of Research

Since this study is in the form of a literary study, textual analysis will be the main tool employed. The goal of using textual analysis in this study is to be able to fully understand various cultures at different time points by describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the content, structure, functions, and characteristics of texts, such as movies, television programs, magazines, advertisements, recorded or visual messages, clothes, graffiti, and so on (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999; McKee, 2003). Textual analysis also benefits the researchers who want to make use of cultural studies, media studies, or even studies related to sociology and philosophy (McKee, 2003). Therefore, textual analysis will be used throughout the process of analyzing the novel, *The Danish Girl*, while the queer theory will be used as a magnifying lens within this type of analysis. To answer the research questions about how the life of Einar Wegener is portrayed in this novel as a transgender.

Source of Data Analysis

The Danish Girl, written by David Ebershoff, is inspired by the real-life story of Lili Elbe, a Danish artist, that took place in the early 1920s – the mid-1930s. Einar Wegener, a landscape and painter artist, and Gerda Wegener's, a portrait artist, married life goes through both times of happiness and difficulty. Einar is asked to model and wear a woman's dress for a portrait, as a part of Gerda's painting process. Eventually this becomes a turning point for Einar's groundbreaking journey of becoming the first person who undergoes sex reassignment surgery. Because of the initial process of dressing up for his wife, Einar discovers a strong connection to the feminine identity. As it becomes clearer this female is his true identity, Einar bravely decides to live his life on his terms, despite the unfair treatment and other pressures he receives from society. He has to fight his way to becoming a pioneer within the transgender community of his era. Fortunately, with love and support from Gerda, his wife, Einar successfully transforms into his female identity of Lili Elbe, making the complete change to Lili is a noteworthy event in the history of the transgender community.

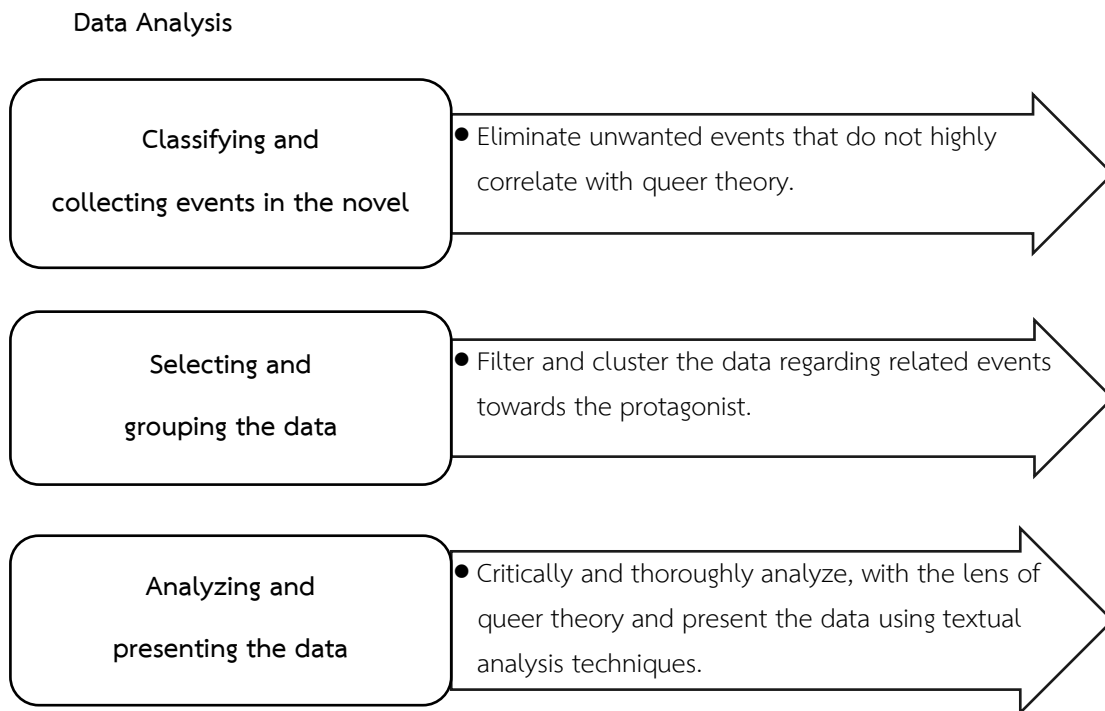


Figure 1 Phases of *The Danish Girl* Analysis

Results

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the life of Einar Wegener is presented. The results are then analyzed qualitatively. The following are factors that contribute to Einar becoming a pioneer for the transgender community.

1. Confusion

The first factor considered a turning point in terms of Einar realizing another identity inside of himself, this creates confusion and desire to transform into a woman.

“‘Anna’s cancelled again,’ Greta said. ‘She has an extra rehearsal of *Carmen*. I need a pair of legs to finish her portrait, or I’ll never get it done. And then I thought to myself, yours might do.’

‘But I can’t wear Anna’s shoes,’ Einar said.

It is true he never speaks his mind, but his action says it all.

Looking at them, Einar imagined that the shoes might in fact fit his feet, which were small and arched and padded softly on the heel. His toes were slender, with a few fine black hairs. He imagined the wrinkled roll of the stocking gliding over the white bone of his ankle. Over the small cushion of his calf. Clicking into the hook of a garter. Einar had to shut his eye.” (chapter one, page 4, paragraph 4).

It was also mentioned that the other day Einar was attracted to a midnight-blue dress on a mannequin displayed in the window of Fannesbech’s department store. Greta asked if the dress was

pretty. He does not respond and continued looking at the dress with his eyes wide open. He was so interested in that dress that Gerda had to pull him away. (chapter one, page 4-5).

On the other hand, Sari's (2017) suggests that Einar's act can be interpreted to an act of compulsion from encountering difficult situation. For instance, Einar has no choice but to obey and wears Anna's shoes, so Gerda can eventually finish her portrait. Sari also mentions that such an environment can shape a person to become someone else if forced to do something unwillingly. For example, Einar begins his transition by chance because Anna Larssen, who is a popular actress and friend of the couple, is absent that day.

In Saputra & Bahar (2020)'s study, they tended to look at biological factors that indicated disarrangement of chromosomes, hormones, brain structures, neurological disorder, and other imbalances.

Looking back at the novel to a scene where Einar visits his doctor. "His doctor, when he'd gone to him last year with a question about their inability to produce children, had asked, 'Do you ever long for someone other than your wife, Einar? For another man perhaps?' 'No, never. Not at all,' he replied. 'your inkling is wrong.' Einar told the doctor that he, too, became disturbed when he saw the men with the quick, frightened eyes and the excessively pink skin loitering near the toilets in Orstedsparken. Homosexual! How far from the truth!"

2. Society-based

During the 1920s, it is the time that people lived in a narrow-minded society (Bustillo, 2020). It is not then surprising to see evidence of mistreating a transgender during that time, representing negligence, and Einar should be treated humanely. Einar visits Dr Hexler's clinic to examine his body. Despite the doctors cold-hearted greeting 'Didn't the nurse ask you to remove your clothes?' Dr. Hexler is also proud of his clinic's technology and exaggerates the ionizing radiation machine without checking Einar's conditions and readiness for the operation. Einar then asks Dr Hexler.

'What will it do to me?'

'It will look inside you.' And then, as if offended, 'It will *treat* you.'

'Do I really need one?'

But Dr Hexler was already sending orders through the funnel.

'Let's strap you in,' Vlademar, Hexler's assistant, said Einar asked if it was necessary. Vlademar grunted his reply. (chapter eleven, page 107, line 9).

'And if it's the devil your husband's got in him,' Vlademar added, 'I'll zap it out.'

'That's the beauty of the X-ray,' Hexler said. 'It burns away the bad and keeps the good. It might not be exaggeration to call it a miracle.' Both men smiled, their teeth reflected in the black glass, and Greta felt something small and regretful beneath her breast. (chapter eleven, page 111, line 21).

This study shares a similar aspect with Sari's (2017) study. It can be concluded that even people in Copenhagen, Denmark are open, but Dr Hexler, in the novel, does not allow Einar to freely roam around the city and other places. The world is yet to fully accept Einar's identity as it is considered a sort of devil that needs to be removed from a doctor's point of view. In addition, Sari (2017) also added a verse in the Al Quran showing gender deviation, which shows that homosexuality or same-sex relationships are not a new behavior for humans. On the other hand, Saputra, & Bahar (2020) loosely focus on the unfair treatment but underline the importance of gaining new knowledge about organs and how painful and difficult it was for Einar during the operation. For some people, especially doctors, confusion in masculinity can be cured, but for Einar how he feels is beyond imagination, since it is his identity.

3. Family

In Sari's (2017) work, she mentions that Einar has grown up without his mother since she died giving birth to him, leaving him to grow up with only his father. From paragraph 3 line 7 (chapter three, p. 32), it reads "opposite the bed was the pickled-ash wardrobe where her clothes waited, exactly as she'd left them the day she gave birth to Einar." As this line implies, Einar lost his mom as a baby; however, growing up alone with his father did not make him become more masculine. In fact, it was found that Einar later undergoing surgery transitioning to female was not influenced by their mother.

Moreover, there are two events that his father tends to keep telling him or scolding Einar every time he gets close to his mom's belongings it is as follows:

Yet, despite his admiration, Einar also resented his father, sometimes cursing him as Einar dug in the bog, his spade cutting through the peat. On the table next to his father's sickbed was an oval daguerreotype of Einar's mother, her hair twisted into a wreath around her head, her eyes silvery. Whenever Einar picked it up, his father would take it away and say, 'You're disturbing her.' (paragraph 3, line 1, chapter three, p. 32).

One day when he returned from an hour of chat at the neighbour's kitchen table, he found Einar, small at age seven, in the drawers, the amber beads twisted around his throat, a yellow deck-scarf on his head like long, beautiful hair.

His father's face turned red, and his eyes seemed to sink into his skull. Einar could hear the angry rattle of his father's breath in his throat. 'You can't do that!' his father said. 'Little boys can't do that!'

And little Einar replied, 'But why not?' (paragraph 3, line 1, chapter three, p. 32).

Two studies point out different aspects in terms of family. Sari's (2017)'s study categorizes these events under environmental factors. To illustrate, she claims that Einar fears his father's reaction and does not want to grow up with the same anger as his father. However, Saputra & Bahar (2020)'s work, although it also talks about environmental factors, focuses on wrongful education starting in his childhood that then allows the boy to do bizarre behaviors during his adolescence, having sexual

intercourse with boyfriends, husbands, or wives. They also mention family factors, however, the study focuses on his life with Gerda not his family background as a child.

There is still no answer to why Einar's father always talks to Einar coldly and scolds him from time to time. It could be that he thinks Einar is the reason for his wife dying, which would explain the moodiness of the father and how angry and aggressive he gets towards Einar. Furthermore, Einar's performative acts trying to mimic his mother shows a sign of his interest in femininity when he is a young boy.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are plenty of studies analyzing Einar Wegener in the movie, *The Danish Girl*, in terms of the transgender phenomenon, gender identity, and even gender on fashion. However, this study focuses on the protagonist, Einar Wegener, in the novel version of *The Danish Girl*. In addition, Butler purposes that transgender individuals are derived from many factors such as socially constructed and performative factors. It is clear that the writer paves the way to transitioning and a sex reassignment surgery. However, it is considered that a biology factor should also be taken into an account. It shows that he wanted to change both personality traits and his body. Therefore, it is interesting to highlight the other leading character, Gerda Wegener, Einar's wife, with other lens or theories to investigate how she has been through difficult times and had to make tough decisions influenced by society and her surroundings. Throughout the story she manages to overcome such situations, that take an immense amount of generous support as well as deep understanding towards her husband. Therefore, analyzing Gerda Wegener as the main focus in future studies could be interesting in order to see different aspects from researchers and related scholars.

Acknowledgements

My deepest respect and immense gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Asst. Prof. Dr. Nantawan Senchantichai for her support, provisions, suggestions, and useful comments with warmest encouragement and understanding given to me. Without her, this study would not have reached the level of success.

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